

Reflective assessment in work-integrated learning: To structure or not to structure, that was our question

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This paper reports the findings of a research study on whether or not to structure reflective assessment tasks. It examines students' perceived benefits or limitations from structuring reflective assessments in a Commerce WIL program at the University of Wollongong. Sixty-four students over two semesters responded to a questionnaire on their perceptions of structured reflective assessments in the Internship Program. The findings of the self-reported experiences were heterogeneous and indicative of the dominant themes relevancy and flexibility. We suggest these themes stem from a misalignment of assessment and reflective practice. Correcting this misalignment could be achieved by providing a balance of structured and unstructured reflective tasks. This study serves as an important reminder for WIL program administrators to examine their assessment strategy and decisions pertaining to structuring reflective assessments. (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 2012(2), 103-113)

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The key components in the design of a work-integrated learning (WIL) experience, particularly in terms of the nature of assessing WIL activities, are still being unpacked in the literature (Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher, & Pretto, 2008). There is a lack of consensus on how these components should be structured in WIL pedagogy to support and enhance the learning experience (Brodie & Irving, 2007). Reflection-based activities are recognised as a valuable WIL tool (Bates, 2004; Doel, 2009; Howard, 2009). Reflective assessment can transform tacit knowledge into explicit, assessable learning (Howard, 2009) and can enable students to make personal discoveries and learn from placement experience (Bates, 2004; Howard, 2009). While the benefits of reflection are widely recognised, implementing reflective techniques in assessment is not always successful. In a recent study, Doel (2009), investigating the use of structured assessment during engineering internships, found that while few students thought the assessment useful, others felt the assessment mechanical, easily fabricated and requiring an uncomfortable degree of disclosure. Ineffective reflective assessment can impinge on the learners' potential and create environments that are not conducive for learning (Boud & Walker, 1998). So what then, are appropriate ways to assess WIL through reflection to allow students to learn most from placement experiences?

There is a growing need to evaluate and improve current WIL assessment practices (Patrick et al., 2008). The research undertaken in this study is based on an internship program for

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business students and their need to engage with this issue. The Commerce Internship Program at the University of Wollongong is for undergraduate business students to develop skills through practical experience. The aim of this research study is to review and evaluate current assessment practices in the program. The focus for the Internship Program is not on *what* is learned but rather *how* it is learned (Bates, 2004). Based on this emphasis, the program was designed to specifically include reflective-based activities so as to realise and assess learning. The program uses a structured reflective assessment strategy, comprising instructions to guide and assist students in completing the tasks and specific questions to scaffold the reflective process, direct attention to particular areas of learning and provide some uniformity. The effectiveness of this structured reflective assessment strategy was examined through surveying two cohorts of students in the program for their perceptions, feedback and recommendations.

This paper explores Patrick et al.'s recent call for "further investigation to ensure that assessment methods used in WIL programs encourage reflection and integration of theory and practice" (2008, p. 42). The research questions under examination therefore include What are students' perceptions of the reflective assessment tasks to support their WIL learning? How does the current structuring of the reflective eLogs and Journal afford or constrain potential learning? How do students feel about the assessment strategy for this program and to what extent does it allow them to reflect on their experience? What recommendations can be made to the Commerce Internship Program to improve the current assessment strategy? To answer these questions, first, an overview of the literature is presented, highlighting reflection and assessment in WIL and insights into the question of whether or not to structure. Second, the empirical research is described and recommendations are reported. The paper concludes with an important reminder to WIL administrators and other academics interested in reflective learning regarding the alignment of assessments with students' diverse learning experiences.

REFLECTION AND ASSESSMENT IN WIL

It is a well known practice to use reflective assessment to demonstrate learning in WIL (Woodley & Beattie, 2010). Assessment strategies may include self and peer assessment, assignments and projects, memorandum reports, portfolios, dissertations and theses, journals, presentations, poster displays and learning contracts (Gray, 2001). Reflection is seen as the 'connective tissue' (Woodley & Beattie, 2010) between diverse sites of learning, thus integrating and opening up these disparate fields for learning opportunities. However, there are multiple issues to address when introducing reflective assessments. Some of these are the tensions when using higher education assessment for workplace learning; the multiple stakeholders in WIL; the personal nature of reflection and construction of the reflective environment; and, finally assessment tools including decisions of structure and composition.

Unlike traditional subjects, where students are learners of discipline-specific content, a large degree of variability in roles, organisations, workplace cultures and approaches are evident in WIL activities. This variability plays an important role in the design and customisation of assessment methods and strategies in WIL (Patrick et al., 2008). An debate is emerging in the literature surrounding WIL assessment learning outcomes (Heerde & Murphy, 2009). For many programs, learning outcomes recognise individual-based processes and locate assessment in the development of generic skills (Costley & Armsby, 2007). Elsewhere, it is argued that any specification of content, including that which is generic or focused on

specific skills, is problematic and espouses assessments focused on workplace experience (Bates, 2004). The tension between the diversity of learning in the workplace and the standardised requirements when studying a university subject, fuel this ongoing debate.

Given that in many cases the learning is located outside the walls of higher education institutions, WIL activities involve (at least) three stakeholders: student, employer and academic. Stakeholder considerations, such as level of employer involvement and university staff availability, may impact upon assessment strategy (Patrick et al., 2008). When introducing reflection as assessment, consideration may also be afforded to the 'three-party knowledge interests' of stakeholders (Walsh, 2009). Costley and Armsby (2007) remind us of the challenges presented through the involvement of these stakeholders, particularly for the learners, noting that "there is sometimes a tension for work-based learners between the institutional drivers of the organisations for which they are working, their own value system and how they would like to develop themselves" (p. 31). Introducing reflection into the mix, this dissonance is further amplified through the often disparate roles of formal or 'academic' reflection, and informal reflection in the workplace (Walsh, 2009).

The central aspects of reflection add complexity to the debate. Reflective techniques are used by students to draw on, become aware of, or make connections between the experience, theory, and personal or professional growth. Reflection calls upon learner's disclosure of often private thoughts for the purposes of examination and grading (Cox, 2005). Challenges that may arise due to the personal condition of reflection include inappropriate disclosure, uncritical acceptance of experience, going beyond teacher expertise, and use of excessive teacher power (Boud & Walker, 1998). These tensions may further emerge if students are evaluated on their knowledge and writing proficiency, while reflection inherently encourages exploration of the unknown. Students may feel pressure to censor their reflection or write what markers want to hear or what will award them higher grades (Boud & Walker, 1998). Educators are encouraged to create a safe environment that promotes open dialogue between students and evaluators (Cox, 2005). This may also include building trust, permitting meaning making, framing disciplines and professions, considering the interest of the student and the teacher's own agenda, and setting boundaries for reflection (Boud & Walker, 1998).

Establishing a reflective climate includes transitive practices to discuss and prepare learners for reflective tasks prior to the commencement of placements (Cox, 2005; O'Toole, 2007). A known reflective assessment task for WIL programs is the daily or weekly journal, which allows learners to reflect through the transition and track developmental progress. Clear instructions are recommended in the weighting of journals to ensure completion of journal entries throughout the placement (Alpert, Heaney & Kuhn, 2009). Who is responsible for the grading of assessments, however, is another ongoing debate in the literature (Alpert et al., 2009; Boud & Costley, 2007). These issues and considerations contribute to the dilemma driving this enquiry. That is, taking into account the personal nature of reflection, the diverse experiences of students and the need to meet university assessment policy, how do we structure reflection to best engage students with learning? This question directs us to understand the importance of not *what* is assessed but *how* (Bates, 2004).

Structured reflective assessment

Ambivalent findings are produced in studies investigating the effectiveness of structured reflective assessments (Manns, 2003; Smith, Clegg, Lawrence & Todd, 2007). On one hand, structure can create the necessary boundaries to direct attention and prevent diffuse outcomes (Boud & Walker, 1998). It has even been argued that without structure, stimulus or prompts, students are unlikely to spontaneously reflect by themselves (Doel, 2010). Alternatively, the literature highlights the possible impediments to offering structure in reflective assessments. Structured reflection may be seen as intrusive to the work situation, potentially inhibit effective reflection (Walsh, 2009) and misconstrue the purposes of learner-centred approaches (Boud & Walker, 1998). This can occur if reflection is seen as a set of instructions that require students to reflect on demand. Restricting reflective activities may lead to the learner's false expectations of the assessment and redirection of the task's goals, potentially leading to teacher-centred agendas or a learner's surface descriptions, with an absence of any critical reflection (Boud & Walker, 1998).

Boud and Walker (1998) warn that not all reflection leads to learning and not all learning activities lead to reflection. They argue that through the guidance of the teacher, a careful blend of following instructions and a lack of structure is necessary. Cox (2005) presents one such carefully structured reflection model for undergraduate students in a range of work-based learning activities. Drawing on Johns' (1994) model of structured reflection (MSR), Cox presents a modified framework of questions or prompts for adult learners under four areas: description of experience, reflection, influencing factors, and learning, and in this way attempts both structured and unstructured assessment through her framework.

A lack of consensus in WIL literature is evident in approaches to structuring reflective activities. For instance, Maire's (2010) study on the effectiveness of a structured reflective post-placement seminar, found that it was useful for engaging students in personal reflection in a social context and for personal development. This seminar, however, while benefiting from highly structured reflection, displays strong interaction, uses verbal content and was not directly assessed, although those authority figures were present at the time of reflection. Doel (2009) similarly uses highly structured reflection for students to scrutinise a placement event, through a standard analysis template. Meanwhile, Woodley and Beattie (2010), in a legal placement program, suggest the value of relevant and scaffolded prompts for reflection, suggesting minimal structure is required to engage students with learning from placement. While the best approach for structuring reflection in WIL remains unrealised, there is a pocket of studies in the context of business programs that highlight assessment issues.

WIL business programs

Graduate entry into many professions is regulated by professional bodies that significantly contribute to curriculum, learning outcomes and assessment, in disciplines such as nursing, welfare, law and education (Patrick et al., 2008). Unlike these disciplines, many higher education business courses do not have compulsory work-experience modules and, with the exception of accounting and finance, most are not governed by accreditation criteria or professional associations. This lack of regulation provides opportunities for those setting up WIL business or commerce programs and has implications for designing assessment strategies.

A small number of WIL studies in this domain focus on reflection as a core assessment task (Alpert et al., 2009; Brodie & Irving, 2007; Carson & Fisher, 2006; Cord, Bowrey & Clements, 2010; Cord & Clements, 2010). Investigations of assessment-related phenomena in a range of business disciplines provide insights into students' perceptions of WIL assessment, stakeholder's assessment preferences (Alpert et al., 2009), self-reported development (Cord & Clements, 2010) and thoughts on discipline or career path (Cord et al., 2010). Students reveal that keeping a reflective log and opening up a dialogue with critical friends are important for the reflective process (Carson & Fisher, 2006). While one study shows that a quarter of the students have difficulty with reflective assessments (Carson & Fisher, 2006), another reveals that students prefer business-style evaluations and would rather be assessed by the workplace supervisor (Alpert et al., 2009). From an industry perspective, managers have been found to be less interested in assessing students if this means translating it into a university-style grade and overall give the lowest weighting to the reflective journal as a means of evaluation (Alpert et al., 2009). Academics, on the other hand, have articulated their preference for major written reports and written reflective journals as assessment mechanisms (Alpert et al., 2009) and use assessment as a means of feedback for program and subject improvement (Beard, 2007).

Recent interest in undergraduate business WIL programs invites the development of reflective assessments that emphasise individualised self-reflective processes to improve learning outcomes (Marchioro, Ryan & Cripps, 2011). They argue that this emphasis would allow students to be more fully engaged with their own skill, personal and professional developmental progress. The shift from evaluating knowledge and cognitive dimensions uniformly across students, typically through measurement models, to a personalised, practice- and affectivity-based approach, is reminiscent of the perceptions of students in the current study, as the following section will now detail.

RESEARCH STUDY

The Commerce Internship Program at the University of Wollongong comprises sixteen days' practical experience for business students in any major discipline, including management, marketing, accounting, finance, and economics. This WIL program is a third year elective course whereby students apply to engage in the program based on the job roles in a particular discipline made available by nominated organisations who have expressed an interest. The program runs in two semesters on the university calendar, Autumn (March-June) and Spring (July-October). In addition to the 16 placement days, students are required to complete three assessment tasks and attend two lectures. Students are supported with an online learning space that details all instructions for the assessment tasks.

Assessment strategy

The assessment strategy comprises three tasks:

1. Daily eLog (15%): To capture reflections in a timely manner throughout the placement. The eLog can be used by lecturers to monitor student's welfare and by students to realise their learning.
2. Response to three modules (60%): To direct students to reflect on key areas of placement and relate these to their experience and learning.
3. Reflective journal (25%): An overall reflection on placement, taking into account the daily eLogs and the case studies.

These assessment tasks are structured through the provision of templates comprising sets of questions. The guiding questions for each of the assessment items are provided in Table 1 below. Each task contains two suggested eReadings accessible through the eLearning site for the subject. The readings and templates are accessed through the site, downloaded and subsequently uploaded back to the eLearning space. Assessment due dates are spaced across the semester: eLogs are due the Monday following every placement day, the generic modules are due during the semester and the final reflective journal is submitted at the end of the semester. The design of these tasks was such as that the eLogs would serve as input like reflective data for the compilation of the reflective journal. It was decided to provide explicit and clear instructions for each of the reflective tasks and examine students' responses to this assessment strategy over two semesters on comparative and longitudinal grounds.

TABLE 1:
Commerce internship assessment strategy and structured reflective questions

Assessment	Questions
Daily eLog	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Activities undertaken today <i>Discuss or list the tasks or activities you engaged in today.</i> 2. Your role in given tasks <i>Discuss how you contributed to the tasks, what your role was in these tasks and what you thought about your role.</i> 3. Interactions with people or departments <i>Discuss who you came into contact with.</i> 4. Thoughts or impressions <i>Overall ideas, feelings or impressions.</i>
Modules	<p><i>Identify, describe, illustrate with examples and draw on the readings to reflect on these themes in your current placement</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Workplace Environment 2. Team Work 3. Critical and Creative Thinking
Reflective Journal	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide an overview of the organisation and identify your key tasks and roles. You may use a combination of text and diagrams, tables and pictures. 2. Outline the skills you applied on this internship placement that were developed in your university studies. 3. Identify specific skills you began to develop during your placement. 4. Identify what you have learnt from a personal perspective during your internship placement, including the possible identification of strengths and areas in need of improvement. 5. Reflect on how you might change your learning style based on your learning experience in industry. 6. Reflect on your overall experience and discuss how this might inform your future university studies or the progression into your chosen career.

METHOD

To explore students' perceptions of the Internship Program's reflective assessment strategy, a self-completion survey was developed and distributed to two cohorts of students in the Autumn and Spring sessions of 2009. The survey comprised seven open-ended questions regarding student's thoughts and experiences with reflection and the current assessment design. A total of eighty-three (83) students completed the Internship Program (Autumn cohort = 34, Spring cohort = 49). In the last week of each semester, a class debrief was held and students were invited to complete the questionnaire to provide feedback about the Internship Program, particularly in terms of how the reflective-based tasks supported their learning. This research met the ethical considerations required and approved by the University of Wollongong, Human Research Ethics Committee.

The survey questions addressed the four research questions proposed earlier: Student perceptions of how reflective assessment helped student learning; current structuring of reflective assessments; utility of current assessment strategy to allow reflection; and recommendations for improvement. The questionnaire received a seventy-seven percent response rate (64/83 students). Twenty-five of the thirty-four (25/34) students from the Autumn cohort and thirty-nine of the forty-nine (39/ 49) students from Spring cohort completed the questionnaire (total 64 respondents). Thematic analysis was performed independently by two investigators in the study, adopting open-coding. Open-coding comprises "taking text data or pictures gathered during data collection, segmenting sentences (or paragraphs) or images into categories, and labelling those categories with a term" (Creswell, 2009, p. 186). The investigators compared findings and, where discrepant, discussed and resolved these to produce the findings presented below.

RESULTS

The first research question concerns students' perspectives on using reflective assessments to support their learning on placement. Overall, the survey responses were favourable towards using reflective assessment tasks, with 33 students (56%) describing the benefits. One student recalls "because it forces you to review what you have done and to find out the problem or mistakes". Fifteen students (23%) were unsure whether this reflective assessment task supported their learning, as one student discusses whether they thought the reflective assessment task beneficial: "Yes and No. Whilst writing prompted reflection, I found/find reflection as an intuitive, internal process and often found reflection occurring on the drive home". Eight students (12%) displayed disagreement towards the benefits of reflective assessments for learning. For example, one student presents their concern for the task: "It did not help my learning. I felt it hindered the experience needing to deduct everything into a learning experience". The remaining eight students did not respond.

The second research question points to the structured nature of the reflective eLogs and final Journal. Students were asked if the structured format of the eLog and Journal helped or hindered their reflective practice. The majority of students, represented by 30 students (47%), believed the structure helped them reflect on their experiences. These students described the assessment activities as valuable for recording experiences, tracking progress, realising progress and learning, organising thoughts and, identifying strengths and weaknesses. The next largest category, seventeen students (26%), were those students who were unsure of the usefulness of the tasks, or indicated that they thought the structure both valuable and restrictive. Eight students (12%) expressed dissatisfaction with the structure of the

assessments; their main reasons being feelings of restriction and that too much weight is placed on evaluation rather than learning. The remaining nine students did not respond.

The third and fourth research questions of the study were focussed on the overall perceptions of the assessment strategy and invited recommendations for improvement. Despite the benefits and positive reactions of a portion of students, the ambivalent and negative comments were concerning. The feedback for the eLogs was that they were 'time consuming', 'repetitive', and 'annoying'. The modules received perhaps the greatest amount of criticism and recommendations. Clearly, some students considered the modules in need of improvement and used negative descriptions like 'irrelevant', 'tedious', 'pointless', 'an annoyance', and, 'they should be abolished'. Others suggested increasing the choice and relevancy of topics, for example, by selecting which modules to respond to from a suite of topics. The reflective journal also received recommendations for improvement, such as providing less structure to allow for greater personal connection to experiences, and by using examples to benchmark assessment expectations and to help the reflective process.

Interestingly, the overall responses from the two cohorts were not similar. Discrepancies appeared in the form of greater negative feedback in the spring cohort. Reflecting on the process of data gathering, the authors considered this exceptional difference as an effect of 'group think'. One particular group of students seated together at a table were quite vocal in their dissatisfaction with the assessment tasks prior to the dissemination of the questionnaire. Upon reflection of the data gathering procedures, the classroom seating arrangements were not conducive for self-completion surveys. With this in mind, the researchers believe that the remarkable emergence of negative emotions in the spring cohort and the absence of this emotive language in the autumn cohort could be explained by the proximity of these students during survey completion. Yet despite this observation, the recommendations and feedback were taken seriously by the researchers, signalling the need to review the assessment strategy.

Based on these findings, three key recommendations to improve reflective assessments were suggested to the leadership of the Internship Program. The suggestions were:

- *Explain purpose of eLogs:* Prior to placement, clarify how eLogs can be used to record, remember and track progress. Students can be encouraged to think about connecting their learning to past experiences, current studies or future employment options. ELog questions need to be revised. The mechanistic structure of asking *who* the students came into contact with *everyday* is limiting and repetitive which results in annoyance and frustration.
- *Case studies more flexible and relevant:* The modules require most restructuring, specifically in terms of increasing flexibility and relevancy such as:
 - i. Allow student's selection of modules based on relevance to placement or discipline, for example, *complete three modules from the eight options*;
 - ii. Use questions that make clearer connections between module eReadings and placement experiences; and
 - iii. Integrate eReadings into module questions and connect the module themes to learning.
- *Allow students to reflect in more flexible ways:* Enhance relevancy and flexibility of the reflective journal, perhaps offering relevant and scaffolded prompts for reflection (Woodley & Beattie, 2010) to engage students with their learning. Open up the questions

to allow students to make greater connections to personal and work placement experiences.

While the study was limited by using a single university's internship program, the specific recommendations of the study support continuous improvement within the Internship Program and have implications for the WIL community. Further research will evaluate the effectiveness of the recommendations implemented into the Internship Program.

CONCLUSION

Based on students' self-reported experiences of reflective assessments, we conclude that the emergence of themes relating to relevancy and flexibility stem from a misalignment of assessment and reflective practice. Correcting the misalignment could be achieved by providing a balance of structured and unstructured reflective tasks. Through the employment of particular terms such as 'pointless' and 'an annoyance', student's emotive articulations are indicative of their strong resistance to the performance of such tasks. Student's resistance to the reflective process emphasises that reflection is not a one-dimensional, cognitive activity but is complex and holistic, often infused with emotion. We suggest a very broad understanding of reflection and acknowledgment of the intensely personal nature of reflection and diversity of experiences (Marchioro et al., 2011). Further, and most importantly, we suggest that the misalignment of current assessment practices disrupts student's diverse approaches to learning. Integrating greater relevancy and flexibility into reflective assessments opens the possibility for greater inclusion of student's diverse learning experiences.

A more holistic approach to reflection may be achieved through encouraging students to consider their learning experiences within a continuum that does not start or end with the internship and its assessment but is infused with personal experience and specific disciplinary learning. While participants were undertaking the same Commerce internship, surface homogeneity belies a deeper diversity, for instance the sub-disciplines Marketing, Finance, Accounting, Management and Economics each have discrete practices and discourses. Recognizing the diversity of disciplines and placement contexts, as a formative part of each student's learning continuum, supports the relevancy of the reflective assessments.

Finally, we return to the question posed at the beginning as to the structure of reflective assessments, on the basis of this study; we conclude that a balance of structured and unstructured activities is most beneficial for student learning (Boud & Walker, 1998; Cox, 2005). Moreover, the provision of more explicit explanation and guidance to students about the purpose of the reflection tasks is essential. Explicit guidance prior to the internship would help students understand how they might best align their reflective activities. Instalments could be in the form of an informative lecture, online material or student exemplars, which would particularly assist those students challenged by reflective writing. For each assessment task, however, students would benefit from less prescriptive templates on how to complete the tasks. Such an approach affords greater flexibility for students to reflect in a way that collapses boundaries across integrated domains such as higher education, work and personal life.

For WIL programs generally, the study is a reminder of the limitations of 'one-size-fits-all' assessment strategies for assessing reflection. This conclusion is not remarkable given the

variability of workplace experiences, practices, cultures and learning. However, the study serves as an important signpost for WIL program administrators to ensure alignment of evaluation measures with students' practical learning experiences and placement contexts, and to examine their assessment strategy and decisions pertaining to structuring reflective assessments.

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About the Journal

The Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education publishes peer-reviewed original research, topical issues, and best practice articles from throughout the world dealing with Cooperative Education (Co-op) and Work Integrated Learning/Education (WIL).

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The Journal does also accept *best practice* papers but only if it present a unique or innovative practice of a Co-op/WIL program that is likely to be of interest to the broader Co-op/WIL community. The Journal also accepts a limited number of *Book Reviews* of relevant and recently published books.

Research reports should contain; an introduction that describes relevant literature and sets the context of the inquiry, a description and justification for the methodology employed, a description of the research findings-tabulated as appropriate, a discussion of the importance of the findings including their significance for practitioners, and a conclusion preferably incorporating suggestions for further research.

Topical discussion articles should contain a clear statement of the topic or issue under discussion, reference to relevant literature, critical discussion of the importance of the issues, and implications for other researchers and practitioners.



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